

Running head: OBSERVATION

Field Research: Learning Through the Process of Observation

Nicholas Daniel Hartlep<sup>1</sup>, M.S.Ed.

University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee

Publication Date: June 25, 2009

---

<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Daniel Hartlep is a Ph.D. student at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, where he is pursuing a degree in Urban Education and Social Foundations of Education. His research focuses on Critical Race Theory (CRT) as it relates to race, equity, and the improvement of education, especially at the PK-12 level. Hartlep is an active member of AERA, currently serving as an AERA campus liaison and Division K Junior Representative. Hartlep holds two degrees in education: a B.S. degree in teaching and an M.S.Ed. in K-12 education. **Author's Note:** Address all correspondence to Nicholas Daniel Hartlep, A.O.P. Fellow, now at the Urban Education Doctoral Program, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, WI 53201.

### Abstract

This paper reports on the process of a participant observation. Its focus is its process, not on what was observed. This report provides the following: (1) an overview of this observation, (2) the purpose of this observation, (3) the site and situation of this observation, (4) two samples of reflective field notes from this observation, and (5) an evaluation of this (observation) experience.

---

**Field Research: Learning Through the Process of Observation**  
**By: Nicholas D. Hartlep**

---

This paper aims to report on the process of a participant observation. Its focus is its process, not on what was observed. This report provides the following: (1) an overview of this observation, (2) the purpose of this observation, (3) the site and situation of this observation, (4) two samples of reflective field notes from this observation, and (5) an evaluation of this (observation) experience.

#### Overview and Purpose

The forms of oppression that oppressed populations<sup>2</sup> experience may vary considerably; therefore these incidents merit closer attention. Oppression may take the form of Eurocentric and ethnocentric educational practices that white elites use in the preK-12 school system. Since the educational milieu for black and brown faces can serve as a breeding ground for injustice, it needs to be radically improved. This can only be achieved through critical research.

#### *Purpose*

The original plan/purpose of this paper changed; it transformed into an inquiry-based or phenomenological approach. I chose to observe at Barnes & Noble, with no preconceived questions and/or beliefs. I suspected that the majority of the patrons that I would observe shopping at Barnes & Noble's would be middle-class or wealthier. I wanted to understand what groups of people visited Barnes & Noble. Ultimately, I wanted to learn about the process of observation and was not aiming to create a product. This was a

---

<sup>2</sup> I use the term *oppressed populations* to include blacks, the impoverished, non-whites, and underrepresented subgroups, such as black women, gay men, Latinos/as, etc.

wonderful luxury, since this *exploratory* approach allowed me only to have to focus on the observation through employing all of my senses.

### Site and Situation

This observation took place at Barnes & Noble (4935 S. 76<sup>th</sup> ST, Greenfield, WI 53220), from 09:00 until 12:00; length of total observation was 3-hours. The hours of 09:00-12:00 were selected since the store opened at 09:00. I thought this would be an excellent time to begin an observation because the bookstore would initially be empty; this would allow me time to select a location to begin my observation. It also afforded me time to set up my laptop computer and purchase a Starbuck's coffee; this would allow me to blend into the atmosphere.

This particular Barnes & Noble was a one single floor store. It had a Starbucks coffee shop in it as well as children's and music sections. It had many areas for shoppers to sit and read books (e.g. padded armchairs, chairs, etc.) as well as a customer/help area in the center of the store.

### Reflective Field Notes Samples

Previously I indicated that I had a supposition that the majority of the Barnes & Noble's clientele would be middle-class or wealthier. Artifact 1 provides evidence of this supposition. I recorded in my reflective field notes that I saw mostly white people<sup>3</sup>. The white people who I observed all appeared to me to be financially secure. I make this inference of "financially secure" because the Starbuck's coffee and the books they bought were costly; perhaps other people did not have the discretionary money that the patrons I observed had (e.g. people may have had to use their money for food, rent, bills, etc.,

---

<sup>3</sup> I did see one black male and one latino male

rather than on books or gourmet coffees). Case-in-point, the coffee I purchased was close to \$4.00.

#### *Artifact 1 Reflective Field Note*

Where I am sitting I can see the barista of Starbucks coffee. It is pretty quiet now. I hear the refrigerator/cooler that has juices in it.

My friend Willy called me. Make sure your cell phone is silenced. Alright, no one is walking around where I am. I need to change where I can see more people or interactions. So far I have only seen white people. No people of color. How do I observe and also take field notes? If I were observing in a different Barnes and Noble would I see different people? People of color? I see another white male. He is walking

I also wrote down how the people I observed appeared to be so relaxful and unstressed. I wrote in my reflective field notes (see Artifact 2): “Oh, wow, the luxury to read, drink an expensive coffee and relax. What do these people do?” When I was observing I got the impression that the customers in Barnes & Noble had no troubles or worries. They were cheerful, appeared to be well-rested, and even intellectually and culturally stimulated. These inferences are predicated on observing the customers’ dispositions as well as the books and magazines they were reading and looking at. I recall seeing a white woman reading what appeared to be a contemporary art design book.

#### *Artifact 2 Reflective Field Note*

I am typing my field notes on my laptop. I need the outlet for my battery to remain charged. Since I installed Dragon Naturally speaking Software I need to keep it plugged in since it uses a lot of battery life/power. Oh, wow, the luxury to read, drink an expensive coffee and relax. What do these people do? I have yet to see anyone without a white face. I faintly hear a soft music in the back of the store. You really do use all of your senses when observing. There is really limited talking. People appear to be quietly looking at the books and not speaking with anyone. There has only been one couple who I have seen. The rest have been by themselves. I want to remain quiet and not say anything. I have a headache. I am stressed about school. The man returned and is now sitting with his wife. What do I look for or hear? How do I write down the most important things? No one has come up to me and asked what I was

Although the culture of the bookstore and the customers was cheerful and happy, I sensed an aura of seriousness. I wrote down in my reflective field notes (see Artifact 1) that I needed to make sure my phone was silenced. I perceived the milieu of Barnes & Noble to be serious because when my phone rang, the woman who was engrossed in her art design

book gave me an unsettling look. I immediately got the impression that this was an unwritten rule while in the bookstore. Perhaps the Barnes & Noble culture calls for a quiet and serious space dedicated to comfort, sophistication, and reading.

### Evaluation

This was my first formal research observation experience. I had a host of diverse experiences which served as challenges during this 3-hour observation. Through this observation process, I learned that the location where one is observing is very important.

While observing at Barnes & Noble there were no ideal locations to position myself. There was *not* one single omnipresent position to sit in order to capture everything happening. At the outset of the observation I sat in a location that allowed me to see the entryway, experience a high trafficked area, have access to a power outlet for my laptop computer—I used my laptop to word process my field notes—as well as experience people in the Starbucks (see Photo 1; Photo 2); however, for all the benefits of this first observation location, there were *many* drawbacks: I could not see the back of the store since there was an obstruction of my sight, I could *not* hear personal conversations, and it was uncomfortable sitting in a wooden chair taking reflective field notes.

Photo 1



Photo 2



I chose to move after 1.5-hours because I felt I was getting the same observations: not being able to hear personal conversations, not seeing human interactions, and not experiencing the milieu. I decided to move toward the back of the bookstore (see Photo 3) since I had already observed in the front of the bookstore. This location proved much more comfortable for the observer since it had three cushioned chairs (see Photo 4). From this vantage point I hoped to view more people talking with fellow patrons.

Photo 3



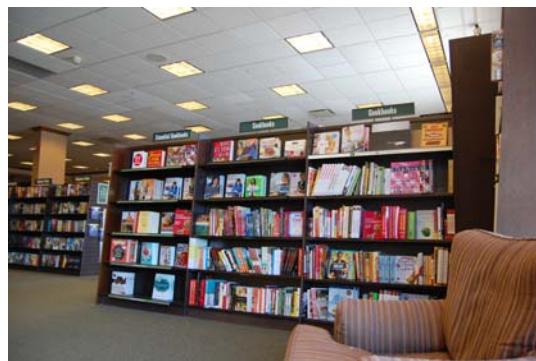
A consequence of changing observation locations was that I did not have access to a power outlet; luckily, I was able to change my battery powerplan to power saver mode, which made it last for the last 1.5-hours of the observation. This difficulty has led me to decide to use alternative methods of record/note taking such as long-hand in future observations.

An internal issue arose while I was observing. I was sitting in an armchair (see Photo 4) and next to me were two men. I was observing them, but they did not know that I was taking reflective field notes on their behavior, mannerisms, and actions. Ethically, I felt uncomfortable. I felt uncomfortable because I felt this was a form of voyeurism. I felt that I needed to disclose who I was, my rationale for observation, as well as why I was doing it.

Photo 4



Photo 5



One of the two men left. This left one man to whom I disclosed my purpose. I informed him who I was and what I was doing. I asked this man if his behavior would have changed if he knew that I was observing him. His response was that it depends. Some people are different and it is totally a case-by-case basis. He said he will always be authentic and real, regardless if he knew or did not know a researcher was observing him

and/or others. He made mention that if someone modifies him/herself, the researcher is not getting accurate and real data. Therefore the research created would not be as valid as it would be if the researcher had not disclosed his/her identity and purpose. He was a young (twenties) white male; he was reading anime and was dressed in jean shorts and a Japanese cartoon shirtsleeve t-shirt. Polkinghorne (2005) declares, “Observation is the technique of gathering data through direct contact with an object—usually another human being” (p. 143). This is a reason why I feel disclosure is important in some situations.

Overall, I think observation work is necessary in the field of research. Personally, I feel disclosure is prudent; however, I do understand the opposite side of the coin: an advantage of observation can be that the subject is unaware that he/she is being observed, allowing for behavior to be observed naturally. This is especially accurate for gathering particular data on people’s habits. I feel that there is a decision to be made when using observation as a method, deciding whether or not a researcher will disclose to participants.

#### *Implications for Future Observations*

If I were to observe again in this setting (Barnes & Noble) I would again choose to move at various times of the observation in order to better capture human interactions and dialogue. This dialogue might provide insight into cultural beliefs and paradigms the customers had through the words and expressions used or statements said. This might help the researcher understand what different groups of people visited Barnes & Noble.

I would also keep in mind that observing in a setting such as Barnes & Noble is difficult due to the enormous size of the building, as well as its ambience (full of quiet readers and consumers). Since people were fairly quiet, I might not use my laptop to take

field notes; rather, I may take field notes long-hand. This would enhance my ability to listen by not hearing my typing on the keyboard. Taking field notes long-hand would also be advantageous because they are portable and I would not need power outlets. I could move around freely while observing.

This assignment helped me understand the strengths and the limitations of using observation as a research tool insofar as there were times that I felt I was able to see and hear desirable interactions; however, many other times I was overwhelmed by the sheer amount of action and movement. I did not know what I should be typing for my reflective field notes because I did not frame my question.

Taking pictures as artifacts helped me paint a broader perspective of my observation. I would use photographs in future observations since photographs strengthen written or *langaged* observations and thoughts. Sometimes I was more focused on the process of taking reflective field notes (asking myself what is important) than on what was transpiring in front of my own eyes. I think this is to be expected of a novice researcher.

### References

Polkinghorne, D. E., (2005) Language and Meaning: Data Collection in Qualitative Research. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 52, 137-45.